

# **Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders: Special Focus**

## **Women, Pregnancy, and Alcohol: Risk Factors**

**When a pregnant woman drinks, her baby drinks with her.** Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) is the leading cause of mental retardation in the United States and can cause facial deformities, growth deficiency, and permanent learning disabilities. The term Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD) includes FAS and the continuum of effects that can result from prenatal exposure to alcohol. FASD cannot be cured, but it can be prevented.

**Alcohol use is on the rise among women of all races, socioeconomic groups, and ages.** In particular, women between the ages of 26 and 34 are most likely to drink. According to the CDC, in 1999, 1 in 6 women in their 20s was pregnant. These years are a woman's primary childbearing years. If a woman doesn't know the risks of drinking during pregnancy, she could unknowingly damage the health of her baby.

**We need to educate young women about FASD.** The fastest growing populations of alcohol users include college-aged women and girls below the legal drinking age. Efforts to teach these women about the spectrum of health risks associated with drinking could be especially effective in preventing FASD.

**Women metabolize alcohol differently than men.** According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), "Alcohol passes through the digestive tract and is dispersed in water in the body. The more water available, the more diluted the alcohol. Pound for pound, women have less water in their bodies than men, so a woman's brain and other organs are exposed to more alcohol before

it is broken down."<sup>1</sup> Women reach higher blood alcohol levels than men when consuming equivalent weight-adjusted amounts of alcohol. This higher exposure leads to more significant health problems.<sup>2</sup> Women are more vulnerable than men to liver damage, brain damage, heart disease and other muscle disorders as the result of alcohol abuse.<sup>3</sup>

**Binge drinking**, which is defined as having four or more drinks in a row, is a particularly risky behavior because it causes a high concentration of alcohol in a woman's blood. Younger women are more likely to binge drink, while older women are more likely to follow a pattern of frequent light or moderate drinking.<sup>4</sup> Binge drinking is especially hazardous for pregnant women.

**As a fetus develops, it is continually vulnerable to the teratogenic effects of alcohol** because it is continually growing. The distinctive facial features associated with FASD develop in the early weeks of pregnancy, before a woman may even know she is pregnant. But significant brain development occurs throughout pregnancy. **There is no safe time and no safe amount of alcohol to drink during pregnancy.**

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<sup>1</sup> "Alcohol: A Women's Health Issue", U.S. DHHS, NIH, NIAAA, NIH Pub. No. 03-4956, August, 2003

<sup>2</sup> Faye Calhoon, DPA, MS, Director, Office of Collaborative Research, NIAAA, Power Point Presentation, NOFAS Hope for Women in Recovery Summit, September 8, 2003

<sup>3</sup> "Are Women More Vulnerable to Alcohol's Effects?", Alcohol Alert No. 46, NIAAA, December 1999

<sup>4</sup> Sharon C. Wilsnack, PhD, et al. "How Women Drink", Alcohol, Health & Research World, Vol. 18, No. 3, 1994

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